

OCTOBER, 2017: Wool

People have been spinning and weaving wool into fabric for millennia all over the world. It is found in remnants of our earliest civilizations. Wool apparently first came to the United States with the Jamestown settlers in 1609. Soon, both Maryland and Virginia were exporting their wool back to England. Domestic wool production from home spinners and small mills alike thrived. Like Tea— its better known counterpart – wool was one of many products that eventually sparked the American revolution. The climate and terrain of the original 13 colonies ultimately proved to be better for raising tobacco, cotton, and other planted crops rather than large flocks of sheep. With the opening of the American West in the early 19th century, the wool industry began to grow at an unprecedented pace. Railroads connected the raw wool production in the West with the Mills and consumers in the east.

In 1801, a huge industry innovation changed weaving looms drastically. Joseph Jacquard invented a mechanical addition to a standard loom that could dictate complex color patterns and designs by using punched cards to lift and lower warp threads. It was said to do the painstaking work of 100 master weavers. His invention spread from his native France to the United States in the 1820s. It is thought to be a precursor to the first IBM computers 150 years later. As the industrial revolution took hold, the wool industry expanded like other industries did. Companies like Woolrich and Pendleton evolved from this.

As the 20th century brought new innovations, techniques, and materials to the textile industry, consumers looked for more fashionable clothing and fabric. Mills that stayed in the United States adopted their lines to include colorful, trendy fabric and apparel to appeal to college students and outdoor enthusiasts. The Beach boys wore popular Pendleton plaid shirts on the Cover of their Surfer Girl album. As more woolen mills closed or moved to production overseas, the ones that survived diversified greatly from their original focus of solely producing a certain type of blanket or apparel. Today, the few heritage woolen mills left in America include not just mainstream wool garments and home products, but high-end fashion collections.